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ABSTRACT

The problems of teaching German literature survey courses have increased in the 1970's because of the drop in enrollment in language classes in general. Previously German literature courses (at the University of Utah) covered large amounts of material superficially; they were designed to familiarize the student with names of authors, titles of works, and dates. Critical analysis and discussion were not fundamental to the study. Today this approach does not work. Contemporary students are interested in literature for personal understanding and growth. Consequently, the instructor of foreign language literature courses should attempt to meet the students' intellectual needs by teaching works relevant to their search for self-realization. In order to do this, it is necessary to limit the quantity of literature to be read so that it may be studied in more depth. In addition, an interdisciplinary emphasis is preferable, making it necessary for instructor to be informed of current trends in fields related to literature. Factual lectures might be replaced by introductory lectures on focal points of a cultural period, followed by discussions that would lead to a greater exchange between instructor and student. Examinations should be essays rather than objective short answers, and students of all departments and fields should be welcomed into the language classes. (LG)

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON SURVEY COURSES IN GERMAN LITERATURE

In this day and age when the steady decline of enrollment in the liberal arts rests heavily on many peoples' minds, it becomes mandatory that the merits and directions of literally all courses and programs offered in our various liberal arts colleges be reviewed. Being in the field of German, I do not propose to have the qualifications to give answers beyond my field of specialization nor do I propose to suggest directions for all problems in the field of German studies. Instead this paper will limit itself to raising a few questions and presenting a few possible answers regarding the problem of teaching the survey course in German literature.

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It is self-evident that in order to propagate a course of any kind in German literature we first have to interest the student in German language and culture, and before that, in the importance of foreign languages and cultures in general. Before I present my views on this question allow me to express a word of caution as stated by Maria Alter in a similar context, namely, that the following arguments do not draw on

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any new discoveries about the nature, the function, and the use of language, but frankly put new labels on old bottles. Novelty is not at issue here. Our product--German language and literature--has not changed, nor have its properties. A modern approach to German cannot add to the product and its properties, but can and should view them from a new angle, reflecting the changed world around us; it can try to find a place for them in our modern world."[1] In trying to find paths to the above mentioned "modern approach" we need to be careful not to shoot beyond our goal. Curricular reform ought to reflect closely the students' view points and interests. The past has proven that the difficulty arises when attempting to assess the needs of the contemporary student accurately. All to often curricular changes have been brought about by special interest groups representing only a small fragment of the students and/or the faculty who had eloquent vocal advocates but did not recognize the viewpoints and genuine needs of the majorit .

In the sixties survey courses of German literature, as well as language courses in general, enjoyed a high degree of popularity. There existed no such phenomena as declining enrollment and small classes. At my institution surveys in the Middle Ages, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century were attended by majors, teaching majors and other interested

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parties who were, in many cases, expected to take these courses toward fulfillment of their degree requirements. Each survey had two sections with approximately thirty-five enrolled students. Even though other institutions might not have had identical programs or the same enrollment figures, the general trend in German literature and specifically in the surveys was one of growth. However, with the dropping of language requirements where they existed before, the drying up of NDEA funds, the generally declining interest in foreign languages and the closely related fact of graduating more language teachers from many institutions--for all levels--than the demand warranted, a nationwise decline became a sad and obvious reality. The fat years were over.

At my university one section was offered instead of the previous two and instead of thirty-five students there now were only fifteen or twenty. These losses in enrollment--at first noted with puzzlement and inaction--demanded some rigorous changes in the structure of the courses from the way they used to be presented. In the past our survey courses constituted, as the name would suggest, an attempt to survey a certain period of literature by an almost lexicographical approach. The survey for the Middle Ages, for example, began with the inception of German literature and ended breathlessly with the Baroque period--from Tacitus' Germania to Grimmelshausen's

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Simplizissimus. The eighteenth century survey started out with the early phases of Enlightenment and then tried to envelop Lessing, Sturm und Drang, and Klassik. The nineteenth century survey began with Frühromantik and ended with a representative sample of the "naturalistic" Hauptmann. Comparably, the twentieth century survey dealt with the various 'isms' of our times and some literature since WW II.

In these courses attempts were made to familiarize the student with names of authors, titles of works and dates. A critical analysis and searching discussions of the works were usually not the dominant features of such a course. But rather, the presentation in the classroom usually consisted of the canned lecture--in German--trying to pass along to the student an overwhelming amount of factual information. In addition students were expected to read a history of German literature like Fricke/Klotz's Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung, Graber/Mulot's Geschichte der deutschen Literatur or, at times, an English version like Friedrich's History of German Literature. To get a sampling of the literature itself excerpts and a couple of complete works were assigned out of anthologies, like the ones by Feise/Steinhauer, Thomas, Priest or the like.

At the end of the quarter the student was inundated with facts which were tested through quasi-objective examinations.

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Yet he had learned relatively little about the process of analyzing a piece of literature critically. Final grades tended to be rigid as they were established largely by the results of the examinations.

Obviously this method does not reach today's student anymore. The contemporary student who studies in the field of the liberal arts does so quite frequently because he suffers from a kind of personal alienation; he is filled with anxieties and disillusionment about the disparate directions modern society takes. He, therefore, is searching for ways by which he can learn to adjust himself to this alien world. He does not want to be part of a simplistic fact gathering exercise. Alter states that the teacher's involvement is not "in a peripheral job for the sake of earning his own living and contributing minor frills and thrills to the 'liberal education' " but is in essential contributions.[2] For the recipient, the student, it can be said that he, too, has the need for depth, substance and for answers to his existential questions. That is to say, any course in the field of literature--but particularly a survey course which attempts to interest the student in a new, so far undiscovered academic discipline--has to answer questions which lead to a higher degree of self-awareness, self-realization or personal growth.

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Naturally this raises the question of relevance, a word which is obviously used quite indiscriminately. Primarily the assumption that relevance means an immediate and direct relationship and an inherent answer to the questions and problems of our time seems to be the sourse of misunderstanding regarding this term. As Jeffrey Sammons correctly asserts, "The results of attempts to make curriculum 'relevant' sometimes suggest that even our best efforts may be far from the students' wavelength because they are so wholly unhappy with being students and with everything around them."[3] This position suggests that the misunderstanding of the relevance of a subject matter is frequently caused by an unintentional short-sightedness on the part of the student--and one might add--also on the part of the instructor. The insights which we can convey through literature, by necessity, are rarely adequate to give an immediate and direct answer, although--we hope that--the pieces of literature which are being studied have been, are and will be of lasting value to the recipient. From year to year it is our obligation to attempt to look anew at the conventional pieces of literature being read from different vantage points, through new sets of glasses in order to align them with the apparent needs of the present and the future.

Therefore--turning to the specifics of the survey courses--

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efforts should be made to limit the quantity of literature to be studied, so that those works which are being read, are being studied in depth. The selections chosen should, in the eyes of the instructor, be masterpieces of the period or author or genre. They should be pieces of literature which through their unique artistic and aesthetic appeal and also through their potential personal impact allow the student to find answers to the complexities of our time. In addition to that--as Katherine Stone correctly infers--foreign literature "brings students into contact with customs, values and thought patterns of other cultures and thus leads to the broadening of their horizons."[4]

Heinrich Böll, for example, can be presented as a "relevant" author in a survey course as I propose it. The political leanings of this particular author, his known life style, his impact on contemporary east-west relations, his depiction of man as the exploiter, all add to his aura of relevancy for an American student exploring German or comparative literature. Böll in various of his short stories, novels and Hörspiele covers social problems which can easily be applied in the broadest spectrum to human ills within today's society--anywhere.

Taking into account the interests of the modern student, it becomes mandatory to use a more interdisciplinary approach than ever before. German literature does not exist in a

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vacuum; comparative literature, art, music, philosophy, psychology, the natural sciences, etc. become integral parts of our own--formerly too compartmentalized--discipline. The dangers of such an approach are obvious: we, the instructors expose ourselves to the criticism of becoming Jack-of-all-trades. Efforts to counteract such frequently justified objections have been made by using the team-teaching approach, yet this solution is not always feasible for practical reasons. Since it is not possible anymore to limit students on that level to the single-minded and somewhat isolated study of German literature, the answer is that the instructor has the responsibility to continue his own educational process at an accelerated rate, in order to meet these new challenges. He has to broaden his own scope of knowledge to such a degree as to be able to discuss intelligently and in a challenging way the more elementary phases of other disciplines insofar as they relate to our own subject matter.

The purely factual lectures of the past thus might be replaced by introductory lectures on the focal points of the cultural period. It can be shown how these periods are reflected in the literature of the time. Subsequently it becomes less important to give the student a huge amount of data, instead he should be introduced to thematic directions. Also the traditional lecture method can be modified to a presentation

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which relies heavily on exchange between instructor and student, thus allowing the student to introduce his knowledge obtained in other classes and, thereby, encouraging a better carry-over than is usually the case.

Yet the impression should not arise that we propose a course of study which could easily turn into a rap-session. No constructive discussion between student and instructor can evolve unless both parties know their material well. This goal can easily be accomplished by making the period of literature or the author under scrutiny an assigned reading in any history of German literature. To avoid confusing the student by a mass of material the instructor will most likely want to recommend his preferred text.

When it comes to the reading of the actual literary selections--which as stated before should be chosen on the basis of being exemplary texts of the period, author or genre--the answer does not lie with anthologies and excerpts. Rather every effort should be made to select complete plays, short stories and poems. In this respect our most inexpensive and reliable source is probably Reclam's paperbacks. Once in a while parallel-reading German and English texts may be worthwhile to show the innate differences between the two languages and to give the student an added encouragement. In this connection I cannot but disagree with Alter who takes

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a rather extreme position against "German literature in translation, reading courses, German civilization courses in English, etc. While interesting and perhaps useful in various ways, these programs are not oriented to the modern world, and meet none of its basic needs. Conceived for pragmatic reasons, they bear the pragmatic stigma and can at best be stop-gap measures, rather dangerous."[5] On the contrary, it seems that some of the alternatives mentioned here are oriented to the modern world and do meet its basic needs. Basically it is a question of judgment, while once in a while a certain approach lends itself well we would not want to utilize the same method in a different situation.

It needs no further elaboration to establish that the reading of the literary texts is the most important assignment of the whole course. Every student should know in advance that to come to class without having carefully read and analyzed the agreed upon selection will render him totally incapable in the seminar-type discussions which should ensue. These discussions naturally ought to be carried on in German as much as possible, as a matter of fact the student ought to be reminded to speak German if he should forget. On the other hand if a situation arises where an important point can be expressed by the student only in English then this means of communication ought not to be discouraged. It is imperative,

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however, that the instructor ensures that the discussion always be re-channeled into German.

During the quarter or semester many students welcome the opportunity to give an oral or a written report which can become--with proper direction--an initial analysis of a piece of literature. Here the student should probably be asked to give his personal reactions to the topic but the emphasis should be put on a critical approach.

In line with the concept of this course any examination would need to be of the essay variety. The questions should allow the student to give answers in the broadest possible context and to use the specific material he just studied as a point of orientation. Since this type of examination tends to require of the student a considerable amount of independent thinking and re-reading, a take-home examination for the mid-term--if desired--and the final, seem to be the best solutions. Obviously answers should be given in German wherever possible. But in the final analysis it should not be overlooked that the purpose of any test is not to find out what the student does not know but what he knows. By the same token he should be graded for what he learned--as shown in oral participation, papers and examinations--and not for his deficiencies.

This issue is becoming of critical importance all over

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the country as students of excellent quality preparing for the various professional schools are trying to expand their horizons by enrolling in liberal arts courses. We, who are in the foreign languages and in German specifically, ought to welcome these students with open arms because many of them still want to believe in the ideals which we support and want to work for them. In the long run, they may become vital emissaries for the cause of liberal arts, foreign languages, and specifically for the sake of German.

Footnotes

[1]Maria P. Alter, A Case for German (Philadelphia, Pa., 1970), p. 21

[2]Alter, p. 22

[3]Jeffrey L. Sammons "Some Thoughts on the Nature of the Undergraduate Study of German", UP (1971/1), 43 f.

[4]Katherine Stone, "The Problem of Literary Relevance", UP (1972/1), 105.

[5]Alter, p. 23

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